The Wasatch Front

Wow, what a ride this turned out to be! At the induction station in Los Angeles, I waited with hundreds of other men and women for medical exams, drug testing, finger printing, photos and all the forms that went with them. I remember the television blaring in one room with President Nixon being questioned - something about "Watergate." Then a mass swearing in ceremony for the room of recruits, proclaimed me officially in the United States Air Force.

At the beginning of July 1973, we were flown to Lackland AFB, Texas to begin 6 weeks of basic training. It was an effective psychological process of breaking down the myriad of individual 'rainbow' personalities, then building cohesion with the rank and file. For the men it was basic locker room head butting and cursing, used to mold them into soldiers. The women, however, were like herding cats. When our female training instructor began cursing, the flight reaction was often only giggles and snorts. The military was not sure how to handle the 'fairer' sex regarding the war effort. They were quartered into semi-private rooms with baths. By the time I arrived, conventional wisdom decided to house the WAF (Women's Air Force) like the men – in open bay barracks with a central latrine. Flight 88 adapted well under these conditions, even garnering a smirk or two during inspections, by witness of the artificial flowers we placed in all the urinals. The females allotted time in the latrine remained longer however, than the men's 15 minutes for a shower, shit, and shave.

We were isolated from world events during this time, and it was for the best. Had I known what happened on July 20th, I would have been inconsolable. Bruce Lee, aka Kato, from the Green Hornet and martial art phenomenon, had died. He was an important buffer and safe place from the first Bruce in my life. His mysterious passing at this very moment in my life was prophetic. An invisible torch was passed then extinguished; I had stepped into a new safe place.

After sailing through basic training unscathed, about half the ladies in my flight went to technical schools, while the rest (Including me) were sent directly to our first duty stations to learn "on the job." My assignment was Medical Administration at Hill AFB, Utah. The job of hospital records was needed everywhere within the military. After a short leave to go home, my folks and I crammed into the little lime green VW bug and drove up to Ogden Utah and Hill Air Force Base. It was located just North of Salt Lake City and the Mormon capitol of the world. *Great – the Mormons…*

I must admit, Utah was some of the prettiest country I had ever seen. We arrived in the autumn, when all the trees were changing. The not-so-distant mountain range, the Wasatch Front, already wore a mantle of white. The air force base was located on a plateau, and we could see the Great Salt Lake and Antelope Island southwest of the base. Around Hill AFB was the farming community of Layton and the town of Ogden was just to the north. After a couple of days, I said "so long" to my folks at the Salt Lake Airport. This was a new experience for all of us because for the next 5 years, this place would be my new home.

My duty station was within the old WWII style hospital that was basically several single level barracks connected by hundreds of feet of hallway. It was late 1973 and a brand new 3-story hospital was under construction. That year's crop of new hospital recruits consisted of 6 blacks, 2 Hispanic, 4 whites and one female (me!). Snarly ol' TSgt Garcia was not enamored with training a female in medical records. I confounded him further with suggestions on how to do things quicker and simpler. I may not have been the most polished, duty-bound recruit he ever had, but I got the job done.

Me at work in medical records.

Next came something I had never trained for or even experienced without total dread – male attention. It generally took the form of teasing, so; as I had done with my brother all my life; I teased back. Over time as we all became better acquainted, some of that teasing turned nasty. One episode, while eating lunch in the hospital chow hall, happened at a table with several other people. The guy next to me was rambling on about me with definite sexual overtones. The table became quiet, and all eyes watched to see my reaction. I asked Jerry several times to knock it off – he wouldn't. As he began his next tirade, I lifted my fork and jammed it into his right hand. That caused a whole new volume of cursing from Jerry, but at least he got up from the table and left me alone. Jerry and I eventually became pretty good friends, and few attempted to get my goat after that.

We had moved into the new hospital, and still the guys were determined to tease me into submission. I was told to come down to the loading dock one afternoon, because the guys had a surprise for me. Several were standing around a trashcan and bid me to join them. They stood back, smirking, as I stepped up to look into the trashcan. Smirks disappeared and eyes bugged out as I squealed with excitement, reached the bottom of the can and pulled up the 5-foot bull snake. "Can I keep it! Can I keep it?"

They watched me wrestle with the squirming beastie, as I got into my VW and drove off to my garden plot on the other side of the base. It was not easy trying to steer and shift gears, with 5 feet of pure muscle squeezing one arm, trying to pull itself under my car seat. We were both glad to be free of each other when I turned him loose among the rows of corn and squash.

Despite the cow eyes, I would get from some of the guys I worked with, I refused their attention and kept pretty much to myself. After my work shift at the hospital, I would go back to the WAF barracks, which consisted of one sealed wing on the upper floor of a men's barracks. When I first arrived at Hill AFB there was just one other woman living in the WAF wing. She didn't last long because she got married and moved out of the dorm. For a while I had the wing to myself. Before long more WAF began to arrive; two to a room, with a central latrine. For all the time I lived in the dorm I had a room for myself. I was pleasantly surprised when one of my basic training teammates was assigned to Hill – Christy Check. We really enjoyed the single life!

The Air Force (or any branch of the service) is like a big brother and mother all in one. They feed you, house you, doctor you, train you and pay you in return for 4 or more years of service. It's an excellent option for young people not attending college to earn income and gain credit for future education. Potential civilian employers look favorably on someone with prior military service.

To keep the off-duty soldier from going crazy or home sick, the base has recreational opportunities - from sports equipment rentals to planned trips. My friends and I went horseback riding and on river raft trips. Christy, Janet Lapek and I enjoyed a long weekend visiting Yellowstone, all crammed into my VW with camping gear. Nurses from upstairs in the hospital asked me to join them on a trip to Snow Basin for skiing. Park City and Snowbird were nearby too. Salt Lake's Trolly Square was a favorite gathering spot – mostly because of the Spaghetti Factory.

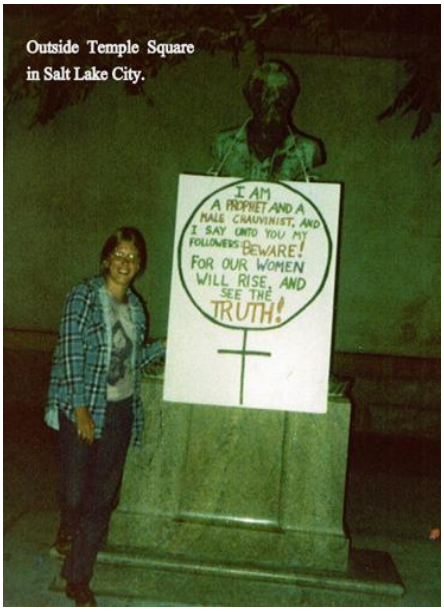
Sometimes, I prefer being alone. I enjoyed just driving around the countryside looking at the farms, fields, houses, gardens and livestock. In my little green bug, with the radio on and windows down I could breathe in the organic fragrances. My favorite time of day was late afternoon, when the shadows were longest and the colors brightest. During one of my drives I came upon a huge swap meet, like the ones I grew up with. I roamed the isles of tables or blankets filled with every imaginable sort of thing: tools, trinkets, jewelry, furniture, antiques, cookware, clothing, pictures, firearms – whew! I had a particular affinity for the natural world, especially rocks. I spent close to an hour picking over water

filled pans of fire agate; a beautiful chocolate brown agate filled with inclusions or bubbles of iridescent fire. I finally selected a lovely stone with a bubble of fire centered perfectly. I eventually took the stone to a jeweler at Trolly Square and had a ring made with it. It was to be a silver band with my initials (TL) in gold on the sides. My vision was not well interrupted by the jeweler, and the result was rather ugly. Never-the-less, I've kept the ring as a symbol of my heady single life.

Summers were an endless number of 'events' with the hospital crowd. Outdoor barbeques always provided kegs of beer, team sports, lots to eat and clouds of wacky tabacky. Sometimes word would go out that folks were carpooling up to the mountain lakes or go off roading into the back woods. During the colder months, groups would head up to Snow Basin to ski or go sledding on inner tubes. Someone always had an open house during Thanksgiving and the hospital itself always had a wild Christmas party. (Would YOU drink from a bedpan punchbowl?)

I was still very much my own woman. I didn't attend these events as someone's 'date'. I was comfortable with myself, by myself. With women's liberation in the news everywhere, the single WAF in the dorm understood their unique situation. I attended a NOW meeting (National Organization of Women) and began to understand the extent of our second-class citizenship. Granted, US women already enjoyed freedoms only dreamed about by women in India, the Orient or the Middle East. I had the feeling I had already achieved most of the NOW organizations goals – namely equal pay for equal work. It's only after a woman married and had children were they, in essence, trapped. Those men again!

Embolden by our heightened status, especially in the backyard of the Mormon church, Christy and I set out one night to perform a little poke in the eye to the church elders. We made up a large poster, that sounded like a prophecy warning. We traveled to Temple Square and found a bronze statue next to the roadway, of a founding father of the church, upon which we hung our sign.



Outside Temple Square in Salt Lake City.

"*BEWARE! For our women will RISE UP and see the TRUTH!"*

Not satisfied with simply thumbing my nose at the same church that tormented the life of my dear friend Mindy, I set out to piss off the Air Force OSI (Office of Special Investigation). Before the policy of 'don't ask, don't tell' concerning gays serving in the military, regular witch hunts would occur and rapidly boot out

suspected airman. The ladies of the dorm caught wind the OSI was staking out a gay bar near the railroad train yards of Ogden. They were apparently hoping to catch a couple of the gals in the WAF dorm, so a small armada of WAF got together and visited the gay bar one evening. Not quite old enough to drink, we still enjoyed the loud music and danced together as a group. It was amusing to watch a waitress in drag serve a newly seated, obviously straight couple. As the waitress bent over and spoke to them, you could see the expressions on their faces suddenly tense with surprise. Their eyes darted around the room, then to each other, and within minutes they briskly vacated the club.

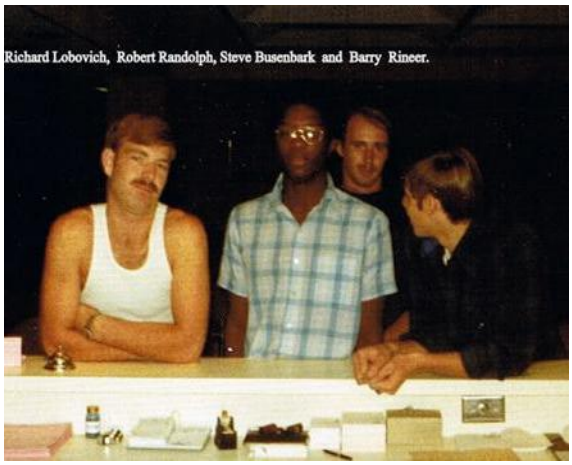
We didn't hear much from the OSI after that. They could probably tell we were closing ranks to protect our own – just as good soldiers should.

If the military was hard on perceived deviations such as homosexuality, the LDS Mormon church was far worse. If gays were an abomination, blacks mingling with whites were downright apocalyptic. In an article written by Connell O'Donovan in 2009, he summarizes church Apostle Mark E. Petersen's racist speech given in 1954 to Brigham Young University college level religious instructors, warning of the 'slippery slopes' to intermarriage and evil. Petersen felt that "allowing blacks and whites to mix in public, whether on a bus or in schools or at a soda counter could only lead America into a downward spiral. Public acts of sociality would lead to private acts of friendship, becoming then conducive to private acts of love, desire and commitment, and culminating in public acts of marriage and private acts of black-white mingling through reproductive sexuality".

With the church teaching such racial bias barely a generation ago, the religious community felt vindicated in its beliefs when the horror of the 'Hi-Fi or Drano Murders' shook the nation on 22 April 1974. Three black airmen from Hill AFB, (Pierre, Andrews and Roberts) set out to rob a Hi-Fi records store in Ogden. The subsequent torture, rape and murder of the employees committed by Pierre and Andrews earned them lethal injections. Roberts, who remained with the getaway car, was paroled 13 years later.

The way the police recovered evidence; from a dumpster near the barracks on Hill AFB; generated a crowd of airmen bystanders. By brandishing the evidence before the crowd and watching their reactions, the authorities noticed only 2 airmen in the crowd seemed agitated – gesturing wildly, talking loudly and pacing. Pierre and Andrews were identified and later linked to evidence found in a storage locker they rented. By effectively reading the crowd, arrests were made quickly. The case is taught to FBI trainees at Quantico, VA. The crime remains one of the most violent in Utah's history.

I remember watching this event from my 3rd. floor dorm window.


Richard Lobovich, Robert Randolph, Steve Busenbark and Barry Rineer.

Amid all the hate and bad press for blacks in general, a breath of fresh air arrived from Somerset, NJ. Robert Randolph was no stranger to prejudice, but to arrive in this place at that time would test his strength of character and generous, kind heart. He came from technical school and had trained to become a Para-rescue or 'PJ'. He trained long and hard within this elite rescue organization. Robert endured a nasty fall while training in snow, that compressed his back vertebra and herniated a disc or two. In addition, there was a problem with his sinus and tear ducts, which caused terrible pressure headaches when he trained for underwater rescue. So 'Bobby' left Para-rescue school and opted to become a surgical nurse instead. When he reached Hill AFB, he was broad in the shoulder and narrow in the hip, tall and easy going. His light and easy laugh, boyish charm and upbeat personality made him fast friends among the hospital barracks. Still, his nickname was 'Grump'.

During the first couple of months he was at Hill, he was just one of the guys. I thought I was developing a crush on a tall, cock-eyed airman named Watts. He, however, thought differently. I found an easier rapport with blacks because, basically, they were not white. (Uncle Bruce again). For the most part, teasing from the black guys was suggestive and brutish, but I considered them friends, and I cared about them. I remember working the swing shift in the records room when I was called to pull Jerry's medical record. I was in a panic to learn he had been admitted through the Emergency Room with multiple stab wounds. He was apparently caught butt naked with a white girl downtown. The girl's ex-boyfriend sent Jerry running for his life, after stabbing him several times. In tears I called his friends from the barracks. We were there to see him when he woke from surgery. He lost his spleen and was lucky to be alive.

Not long after that, the previous injury Bobby endured during training sent him upstairs into traction. After my work shift, I would go see him. His manner of teasing was much more engaging, and he zeroed in on my shy nature with tact and sympathy. Having a captive audience in Bobby allowed me to open personally with him. He was beginning to understand the apprehension I had around men in general.

During one of my visits, we chatted about our birthdays being only days apart, and the fact he had a twin brother! I asked him to hold up his hand so I could compare his hand to mine. As I was about to retreat, Bobby briefly let his fingers intertwine with mine. The

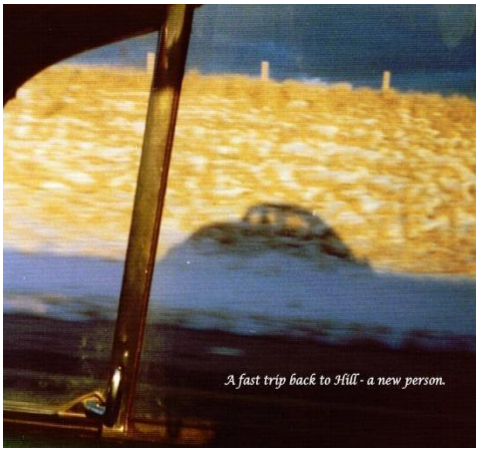
simple gesture startled me, and I tensed immediately. I hesitated from the sudden intimacy, then slowly pulled away. After I said goodnight and headed back to my dorm, the moment between us played repeatedly in my mind. An important door was about to open.

Bobby's bad back required he take a 'Medevac' flight to Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Denver, CO. It was close to Christmas, and I decided to go visit him. I bundled into my bug and headed over the Rockies. Dusk had just swallowed most of the light as I began my decent into the Denver area. The sudden shock of twinkling lights was pure delight. I made my way into town and eventually found the army hospital. I checked into a motel across the street and grabbed a quick bite to eat. Hospital visiting hours would allow me a quick hello. I parked before the immense, multi-story hospital and made my way to the information desk inside the main entrance. I asked directions to the ward he was assigned to. I peeked into a long room where a few other patients were sequestered. I tentatively called out his name. Bobby's head popped up in surprise, "*What are you doing here*?" I went over to his bedside and gave his foot under the blankets a little squeeze, "*I've come to see how you are doing*."

As we chatted, a distant disturbance became louder and louder, making it hard to hear each other. The doors to the ward swung open and a small group of carolers entered the room singing Christmas songs. Bobby loudly complained about all the noise – didn't they know there were sick people in here? I laughed and commented he could still live up to his nickname of 'GRUMP".

The following day when I came back for a visit, Bobby said he could get a pass for a few hours – to see a movie with me. I was surprised the doctors would let him out of traction, but it was fine with me.

We never made it to the movies. We never made it out of my motel room. What did your dad mean about never leaving home without one? The events that followed were a bit of a blur, but I do recall being petrified. I cannot imagine what Bobby thought of me after I took him back to the hospital, but as I left Denver the following morning, heading back to Hill AFB, I knew I wanted more.


A fast trip back to Hill - a new person.

It was Bobby's sense of humor and gentle patience that made my transition to official girlfriend possible. I craved his attention because he made me feel safe.

Like a newly hatched gosling, I had imprinted on him and was happy to be with him wherever he would go. It was 1975 and it would be the best year of my young life. Bobby and I had a short, whirlwind romance. I would sneak him into my dorm, or he'd sneak me into his. Sometimes I'd join him at the base pool as he swam to strengthen his back. There was one time we went camping in the Uinta Mountains and broke his car when he ran over a big rock. We were able to catch a ride into town quickly after I made a sign with campfire charcoal and a manilla folder, declaring 'CAR BROKE.' Mostly we'd go parking and sparking. We became a pair of randy rabbits! He explained a basic fact of life to me in that, "It's not the size of the ship, but the motion of the ocean!" I made sure I would never be seasick because I faithfully took 'The Pill.'

One incident, however, made Bobby avoid me like the plague. He and several other airmen were coming over to the WAF dorm to hang out in the dayroom. I opened the door with another airmen's pet python draped around my shoulders. When Bobby realized what I was wearing, he let out a squawk and plowed back over the guys behind him to get away from that snake! It was a couple of days before Bobby agreed to see me again.

Interspersed with our amusements were episodes where Bobby was sullen and angry. One time he was visibly upset while we sat in the stairwell of the dorm. I was trying to understand his exasperation when I reached out and touched the top of his head. WHOA! Bobby exploded onto his feet and vehemently berated me for touching him like that. I was dumbfounded and a bit scared of his reaction.

He later tried to explain as a young boy he had been sweeping a hallway when some white man walked by, patted him on his head, saying 'It did his heart good to see – blah, blah, blah'. The gist of the comment was that Bobby (i.e. – a black boy) was only good for menial type labor. He was getting the same sort of response from the surgical unit where he worked. Even though he was trained to assist in basic surgical procedures, he was routinely required only to clean up and was not given opportunities to prove himself.

For that reason and considering the general atmosphere against blacks from the surrounding community; Bobby put in for a base swap. He found someone at McGuire AFB, NJ with his same job description who was willing to trade bases with him. Outside of Trolley Square, late one evening, he told me of his plans. Against a lamppost he drew me close to his chest, engulfing me with his coat against the cold. Snowflakes falling from an ink black sky.

So, our roller coaster ride came to an abrupt halt, and we were saying good-bye. He said I was the only bright spot during his Utah assignment. For me, he was the only bright spot in my life.

For the remaining 2 ½ years I was stationed at Hill, I fumbled around in a fog. The following Christmas, Bobby sent me a little necklace with a silver heart, that had a #1 inside it. We kept in touch by calling base to base, or by sending radio messages. He was clearly much happier being closer to home and family. After McGuire AFB, Bobby was stationed at Andrews AFB, MD. While he was stationed there, I flew out to visit him for a week and we stayed in military billeting. We visited Virginia Beach, the Edgar Casey Museum, then traveled up to Washington D.C. where I wanted to visit the Smithsonian. At the museum gift store, Bobby bought me a sunshine pin, and I wore it every chance I could. We visited Georgetown art galleries, ate ice cream, and went to a night club. As great as it was to see him again, I could tell there was a lot being unsaid. I later learned he had been seeing a young lady with two small children. When time came for me to leave, we walked through check-in and to the departure gate. We hugged and said our goodbyes. Bobby turned and began to leave.

He looked back – twice.

So, our lives continued as friends far apart. I began seeing other men in a futile attempt to recapture some of that Bobby magic. There were older men, younger men, a very tall one and a couple that knocked me around a bit. If that was not bad enough, I accidentally became pregnant while using a diaphragm. I was able to delay motherhood thanks to Roe vs. Wade when I confided in TSgt Woodruff on the hospital nursing staff.

That bit of information spread like wildfire through the hospital, and I became more of a pariah.

I turned to retail therapy to avoid people. I bought a cedar chest, pots and pans, and a lovely bird's eye maple dresser with mirror. My largest purchase occurred in December 1976. Another GI was selling a 1936 Chevy on base for $800. He neglected to put a phone number on the sale sign and was flustered because he had no offers. I saw him next to the car and stopped to ask him questions about it. The owner showed me the skimpy engine, mohair headliner and seats, suicide doors and front grill. A phone call to my dad was encouraging – so I bought it! I was the new owner of a 'Gangster Car'!

I was able to rent lodging for the car in a storage shed on a nearby farm. The winters in Utah can be brutal. My June 1977 diary entry stated:

"I did a great thing this morning! Singlehandedly in an hour's time I got the Gangster Car running. I pumped up the tires, put in some gas, dropped in the battery, hooked up cables and nursed her until she kicked over with a roar! I put her in gear and zoomed out of the storage shed, down the road to Morgan's house, turned her around, got out, looked at her then drove her back to the shed. I felt so great; I didn't need any support or help from any old man. Hell with the bastards anyway!"

The following month my dad with his brother, (my least favorite uncle), Bruce flew up to Salt Lake, where I met them with a rented U-Haul trailer. We found a loading dock near the railroad tracks. With some extra-wide planks, plus some steady nerves, I gunned the Gangster Car up the loading dock and into the U-Haul. BINGO! I was due to use some leave (vacation time), and my brother Brian was getting married. So, we all stuffed into the cab of the truck and headed south, stopping for the night in Las Vegas, before heading home to Riverside, California.

The family was happy to see me. Preparations for my brother's marriage would be held there at our home, and it was 'all hands-on deck'. Ohio grandparents would be there as well. By June of next year, I was scheduled to leave the military, and my mother Kay was especially looking forward to that. She was home alone, unable to drive and had few friends outside of the local neighbors. She depended on her creative, fiber arts, to keep her busy day by day. My father ruled the roost and was not willing to see another's point of view or observations if they did not coincide with his beliefs. When I accused his brother of fondling me, I became the black sheep in my family. There was always an 'edge' in dad's interactions with me.

Back at Hill AFB, my tenure was winding down. But my gregarious nature would not be contained. I had a penchant for stealing things – big things. As I left a dorm meeting with the base commander, because my duty shift at the hospital took precedence, I just happened to pluck his car's identification plate from the front of his vehicle. Then there was the beautiful Peter Max designed bus bench, that unbolted easily and fit nicely it the back of Christy's hatchback. But my biggest caper required a few guys and a truck.

On the way to Bear Lake on State Route 30, a large white/black road sign declared the direction to the town of Woodruff. I studied the sign, and the logistics required to free it from the very tall posts it was bolted to. It was easy to find a few willing guys from the hospital dorm plus a truck and tools. So late one moonless night, we pulled up under the sign; one guy stood up on the hood with a wrench; and before long we had the sign free from its moorings. The 3 x 9 ft metal sign fit nicely in the bed of the truck, and we drove slowly back into town. We knew exactly where this sign would go. Quietly, once we arrived at the targets house, we leaned the sign up against the eve of the house, facing the picture window that had its curtains drawn.

The following morning, I was getting ready to open the records section. As I lifted the roll-down partition, I saw TSgt Woodruff and his aide heading straight for me. He was grinning ear to ear.

Without my poker face - I grinned back.

This concluded an important period in my young life. The end of my Air Force enlisted years left me in as much turmoil as when I started 5 years earlier. Only now, Uncle Sam would pick up my tab for college.